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AUTHOR Shaw, A. M.; Emilsson, Elin
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ABSTRACT

Negotiation can be used systematically in a communicative language teaching methodology that allows students to participate in decisions about what to learn, in what order, and how to adjust the learning process and materials to their own learning styles and particular problems. The teacher's role becomes that of manager or informant-model. Even in curricula that are rigidly prescribed there is room for negotiation, which can include any of these elements: exploring students' needs and wishes, discussing objectives, varying the order of objectives, discussing and seeking solutions to student problems with specific types of curriculum elements, discussing classroom organization, and discussing approaches to an activity. Negotiation can be preparatory, reflective, or spontaneous, and it is accomplished by cooperation, not confrontation. A classroom decision-making procedure should be agreed upon and majority opinions respected within that framework. Some techniques for using negotiation include a workshop at the semester beginning to bring about changes in student attitudes, use of a student spokesman to represent the class in communicating with the teacher, small group discussions of problems, and discussion based on teacher's notes of student problems. Pitfalls include student overzealousness, unreasonably high student expectation, individual student domination of the process, and teacher misunderstanding of negotiation. (MSE)

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NEGOTIATION, STRATEGIES, AND WHOSE FAULT WAS IT ANYWAY ?[1]

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A. M. Shaw and
Elin Emilsson
Centro de Estudios de Lenguas Extranjeras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

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1. Introduction

'Negotiation' is one of the fundamental ideas of communicative methodologies (Breen and Candlin 1980). Many teachers may at first be put off by the idea. It suggests a tough process of verbal battling, often coupled with unwillingness to give way on anything. Perhaps the analogy of a horse and rider 'negotiating' a difficult mountain path, working together to find the best way, might be a better one (though not to be carried too far!). Furthermore, decision-making about what to do as a group also involves negotiation to reach a consensus among differing student views.

Breen and Candlin (1980) give negotiation a central importance in their ideas on a "communicative curriculum." Yet they use the term in three quite distinct senses and they do not go into details of how they see negotiation being carried out. Nor does

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there seem to be much literature on the subject elsewhere, or at least not on the subject of negotiation in a communicative methodology.

The present article does not claim to be in any sense a definitive statement on the subject, but rather an attempt to provoke thought and discussion by giving some ideas derived from our own experiences in this area. As we mentioned at the outset, the term 'negotiation' is used a great deal when talking about communicative methodology, but many of us still have only a rather vague idea of what it means or how to use it. We hope this article will be a first step in remedying this situation. We would, however, stress that different teachers may use it differently with different classes and in different situations.

In fact, most of us negotiate already in our teaching in some form or other. Teachers often say things like: "I tried so-and-so, but the students didn't like it, so I don't think we'll do it again"; "The students said they enjoyed doing such-and-such, so I'm looking for some more like it"; or "My students are more interested in speaking than reading." All of these teachers have been negotiating, though they may not have thought of it like that. Every time we take note of student reactions or problems, and either adjust our teaching or try to explain, we are negotiating. But perhaps we could be more systematic in our negotiation.

2. Why negotiate?

Traditionally, students have often been seen as passive recipients. "If we can only get the materials and methodology right, they will learn." This is the idea underlying even many recent methodologies and materials. However, cognitive psychology as incorporated into communicative methodology suggests that the learner learns best when he sees himself as fully (or at least partly) responsible for his own learning - participating in decisions about what to learn, in what order, how to adjust the learning process and materials to his own styles of learning and his own particular problems. Note the word 'participating': firstly, because the teacher

is there partly as a counselor, to give him the benefit of his professional skills and knowledge; and secondly because the student is usually one member of a group, and decisions in a group must usually reflect majority opinions (unless of course individualized activities are available). This does not, however, mean that the group may not sometimes agree to follow up minority interests. The student who does not participate in decision-making of this kind is likely to be more passive in general, less aware of his own learning processes and strategies, less responsible for his learning, and less capable of continuing to learn on his own. Participation through negotiation can help sensitize students to their own learning processes, and can give them a sense of responsibility which will have a beenficial effect on all their learning activities.

3. A change of attitude?

Of course, where students have got used to being regarded as passive recipients instead of participants, they may not take to the idea of responsibility through negotiation without some special activities to sensitize and prepare them. This transition period may not be easy, but it is certainly worth the effort. Indeed, it is not only the students who may need to change their attitudes: the teacher may also need to see his role in a new way - to see himself as a 'counselor', 'manager', 'facilitator' and 'informant-model', rather than in his traditional dominating role.

4. What can we negotiate about, if the program and tests are laid down?

Even the most rigid program allows a great deal of variation. Different teachers can use the materials of a textbook in a very wide variety of ways and can use a wide range of supplementary materials. Their treatment of students and organization of work can also vary tremendously. In fact, it would be virtually impossible to design a program or a series of tests which would really impose complete uniformity on teaching. It is also important to remember that negotiation may involve explaining rather than actually changing the program.

Thus, negotiation could involve any of the following aspects (and possibly several others):

- exploring students' needs and wishes in order to decide what, if anything, can be done about them. Possible outcomes might include a decision to include certain topics, to increase the attention given to a certain skill, to use a given type of activity or material more often, etc;

- discussing the objectives (this could include, for example, place of grammar);

- varying the order of objectives;

- discussing students' problems with, for example, a given objective, activity-type, or type of material, -and seeking solutions (strategies, activities, supplementary materials, even a decision to 'ignore' the problem for the time being);

- discussing classroom organization, distribution of work between whole-class, group and individual work and home study;

- discussing how students would like to do a given activity.

5. When do we negotiate?

We may distinguish three main types of negotiation: preparatory, reflective and spontaneous. In both preparatory and reflective negotiation, and to some extent in spontaneous negotiation, we may explain, re-order or modify objectives, as well as discuss organization of work, possible learning strategies, and so on. Preparatory negotiation comes at the beginning of a level, unit or activity. Reflective negotiation may occur during regular evaluation sessions, or after a level, unit, activity or series of activities. Here the teacher and students discuss the work they have done, particularly with a view to finding out what problems they

have been having, and suggesting strategies or agreeing on further activities or whatever solution seems likely to work. In some cases it may be best to advise the student(s) not to bother about the problem for the time being, and to adopt the strategy of 'living with uncertainty' until he or they are in a better position to deal with it. Spontaneous negotiation may occur incidentally at almost any moment. A problem may crop up in the work, or students may make a spontaneous suggestion, or the teacher may sense that the students (or some of them) are puzzled, bored or restless (and need a change) or are unhappy about some aspect of the activity. In fact, the materials themselves may be designed to give rise to such negotiation.

6. How do we negotiate? - Cooperation, not confrontation!

The most important thing is to remember the purposes of negotiation: to provide valuable feedback to the teacher to help him plan future work; to enable students to discuss their problems with each other and the teacher, and to seek solutions; to allow students to participate in the planning process and make them feel responsible; to sensitize them to their own learning processes; and to act as a 'safety valve', through which problems and frustrations can be aired, even if they cannot always be overcome. Another important thing is that the students see the negotiation as a process in which the teacher collaborates with them to deal with problems and plan work. It should never be allowed to degenerate into a confrontation between the students and the teacher (representing 'authority' and 'the institution'). Where there are institutional problems - departmental objectives, tests, for example, -the teacher should seek to explain them, but if he feels that the students' criticisms are valid, he should say he will bring them up in the department and see if things can be changed, or if not, why not. Where possible he will report back afterwards to the students.

7. Procedures

As we mentioned earlier, each teacher will have his own way (or ways) of handling negotiation. Many negotiations will begin with either a spontaneous suggestion from a student, or the teacher will ask questions like: "Have you been having any problems with the course?" or "Did you find that activity useful?" or "Well, these are the objectives for this unit: are they clear? I suggest we.... How do you feel about it?" If a group does not respond to these questions then the teacher may need to offer them either an alternative or some more concrete stimulus to discussion.

The main thing is that the discussion should be free and constructive and may begin in small groups. A decision-making procedure will need to be agreed on - probably a simple show of hands, or something like that. But it does depend on the students' understanding that they are learning in a group: there are ways of dealing with some of the needs of individuals, but not at the expense of the rest of the students. Majority decisions must be respected. However, the students must also recognize that not all issues can be put to a vote, and that the teacher may have to decide on some himself, even if he is unable to convince them.

This does not mean that the teacher abdicates all responsibility. The teacher's job is to try to ensure that the students do not vote on options he knows to be undesirable (unless he knows that the majority will decide on the acceptable option), but rather to persuade the students beforehand that they are not acceptable, with reasons. The task of the teacher is to know the course objectives and materials as thoroughly as possible, and to see clearly the implications of student suggestions, as well as to be able to suggest solutions to actual problems. This requires a lot from teachers professionally, but the results should be worthwhile and satisfying.

8. Specific Activities

In connection with what we have been saying, it is worth

noting that we may use special activities to help develop the students' awareness of their learning processes, problems, objectives, and strategies, and to enable them to develop the skill of detecting where their main problems may lie. Such activities may be included in course materials. In addition, the following are a selection of possible techniques as examples of what we may do in this respect, though it is fair to say that their development is still in the experimental stage:

- At the beginning of the semester a kind of 'negotiation workshop' might be organized to bring about the change of attitude which negotiation will require. Such a session might be based on a questionnaire, which the students might discuss in small groups before discussing their conclusions with the whole group.

- Decision-making involves the identification of the problem(s). This may, however, be felt to be a criticism of the teacher or the institution. Since students are often reluctant to criticize in this way, and even prefer to blame themselves, it may be convenient to find a more impersonal way of expressing the problems. One way is to get the students to discuss them in groups, so that the group spokesman can report in the name of the group. Another possibility is through a class representative, or using written notes to the teacher, or whatever seems most likely to work with a given group.

- One way of getting students to focus on their problems in a constructive way is to get them, after a test, to discuss their problems in small groups and suggest solutions.

- Another starting point for discussion of problems with students is the teacher's own notes of difficulties the students may have, taken, for example, during communicative activities.

- An interesting way of involving students more deeply in the teaching-learning process itself is to get a group of them to 'present' to the rest an area (for example, a grammatical point) which they have identified as a problem. Some experimentation has been done with this idea, but it needs to be worked with more.

9. Points to watch

Negotiation is not without its pitfalls, but they should not be too difficult to avoid or control. The following are some of the points to watch:

- Students should not be allowed to feel that they can take over altogether. The emphasis should be on participation, not total direction. The teacher retains part of the responsibility.

- The teacher should be careful not to raise expectations too high. It will not be possible to fulfill all wishes. Some may be undesirable, others may be desirable but not possible, or not possible for the time being. In each case the reason should be made as clear as possible, and in many cases it may be possible to suggest an alternative solution.

- Some students may tend to forget that negotiation, in our situation at least, is a group process, and may attempt to impose their own individual wishes. This should be pointed out to them (individually, outside class if necessary), and if they persist in trying to dominate excessively, the best solution may be through the decision-making machinery itself: getting other students to give their opinions, and taking a vote if necessary.

- Teachers themselves may need to develop their techniques of negotiation, and they should also be clear as to what is negotiable. This may involve a change of attitude.

10. Conclusion

As we mentioned at the beginning, this article does not set out to impose norms but rather to initiate discussion. We hope teachers will try out some of the ideas, perhaps in a relatively small way at first. Finally, we hope that our readers may not be discouraged by small failures. Far too often it happens with innovatory ideas in education that the idea does not work out well the first time and the teacher is discouraged. Instead of saying, "Why did it fail this time, and what could I do to put it right?" - we often say, "Oh. Well ,it doesn't work," - and abandon the idea. Everyone can use negotiation in some form. It is just a question of finding the way which best suits us, our classes and our situation.

Reference

Breen M. and Candlin C. 1980. "The essentials of a communicative curriculum in language teaching." Applied Linguistics 1(2), 89-112.